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Christian View of History

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A Christian View of History

Dr. C. T. McIntire, Senior Member in History and Historiography at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, delivered two lectures at Dordt College on January 20 and 21, 1977.

In his first lecture, "The Renewal of Christian Views of History in our Times," McIntire pointed out that the major crises of the twentieth century have driven historians, theologians, and philosophers of widely varying backgrounds to seek anew a transcendent explanation of history. The nineteenth century had been dominated by a liberal faith in progress, sparked by rationalism and European industrialism. But two world wars with a major depression sandwiched between them, large-scale tyranny, and apparently runaway technology shook that liberal faith to its roots and replaced it with the growing conviction that something was wrong with Western civilization—that it was, in fact, not progressing, but on the edge of collapse. And for Christians, this "crisis causation" was seconded by the renewed interest in the problem of history in Biblical studies.

McIntire cited many men of diverse backgrounds, nations, specific areas of study, and denominational commitment as noteworthy in reasserting the importance of a Christian view of history. Although many of these scholars were not evangelical, McIntire explained, all sought to draw on Christ in some way for their views or insisted on the need for Christianity for the survival of Western culture.

Dr. McIntire singled out two men, Reinhold Niebuhr and British historian Herbert Butterfield, as especially influential in promoting the renewal of Christian views of history. According to McIntire, Niebuhr struck the first major blow for the cause by pointing out the inadequacy of secular views in his 1939 Gifford lectures and also in his later writings, especially Faith and

History, published in 1949. Butterfield's Christianity and History, also published in 1949, affirmed the existence of human evil, the importance of redemption, and the need of man, in Christ, to work for good. A host of others have contributed to the movement, McIntire emphasized, increasing the scope of this renewed interest in the meaning of history.

While McIntire's first lecture was essentially a historical survey, the second, "Time, Culture, and the Historical Process," was considerably more technical and philosophical, with Dr. McIntire including some of his own insights on a Christian philosophy of history.

In describing a Christian view of the process of history, McIntire argued for the use of the concepts of Time and Culture rather than the traditional Time-Space limitations imposed by secular historians. Time, said McIntire, should not be considered merely as a fixed date in clock or calendar time. Rather, it is a built-in characteristic of God's creation that all life moves in an interrelated process from past to present to future. One always stands at a point in a continuum, not at an isolated date. The very idea of time is a Christian concept, Dr. McIntire pointed out; time began at creation and will end at the second coming. This concept stands despite secularization and numerous distortions by Western historians.

The other dimension of history, in McIntire's view, should be Culture rather than Space, the generally accepted theme. Space is simply the place where events happen, but "Culture" implies something more global. History involves, not merely a place, but a whole way of life in that place—man integrated with place. A Biblical view of culture implies, above all, development or formation. Humans shape and transform things which God has made. According to the archaic view, people only

redo or imitate what the gods already had had made—real things exist only somewhere in the heavenlies. However, said McIntire, in the Christian view people develop and form culture, either in accordance with or in opposition to the demands of God.

Development in this sense should not be equated with “progress”; for “progress” can often mean going in the wrong way, a negative development. McIntire repeatedly stressed that history is a temporal-cultural process, not “progress” in the customary sense of regular improvement. History moves toward the eschaton, not evolutionary advance. While honoring Professor Herman Dooyeweerd for his use of the formation-development concepts, McIntire specifically rejected the usefulness of Dooyeweerd’s modal scheme for historians. In McIntire’s view, history is a dimension of

all things, rather than merely a distinct kind of matter or modality. Further, McIntire insisted that a certain amount of formation and development also take place in non-human areas, even though the human initiative and creativity of cultural formation are absent.

Thus, McIntire described the historian’s work as the study of the temporal-cultural process of man and man’s relationship to non-human parts of the creation. The historian looks at the events, institutions, and life of any phenomenon; gathering the details of the structures, he examines and organizes them into a temporal-formative-developmental order. And he does this in the grand context of the movement of God’s creatures from Eden to the eschaton, for or against God.

Arnold Koekkoek

“The New Administration: How Will It Address Current Social and Economic Problems?”

The following is a summary of an address on the above subject delivered by Dr. Marvin Kusters, Director of Research of the Center for the Study of Government Regulation of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Opinion, Washington, D.C.

The United States of America is a wealthy nation which produces more than is necessary for its needs. While economic conditions in our nation are generally favorable, our economy is not without problems: inflation, unemployment, energy, and others. There are “clouds on the

horizon.”

The problem of unemployment has become a political problem. Dr. Kusters suggested that statistics which communicate the gravity of the unemployment problem are often misunderstood, thus people are often misled. Fewer than one-half of